

George Orwell and I. An Article*
(March, 1994)

* © Sharmush Parsipur.
Courtesy of the author.

Reflecting on the previous year, I see myself immersed in the world of Orwell's *1984*, sitting on a chair, staring straight ahead, thinking that this book should be presented to our offspring in the Twenty-First Century as "the end result of humanity's endeavors". I ponder about the size of the smallest camera in the world and, finally, I happened to see it on TV, "smaller than a fingertip!" I spent endless hours of very lengthy days during the past year, debating with myself whether or not technology is already advanced enough to control the human mind from a distance, whether it can produce thoughts? Shortly before the beginning of the new year I started hearing voices in my head, voices that drove me to the brink of lunacy. But I am back. And I am the child of the age of the science. Hence, I can't attribute these voices to the supernatural. I'd rather find a scientific explanation for them. But it does occasionally occur to me that I might be mad. Then I recall the fatigued and aged figure of my adolescent idol, Fidel Castro. The older and the more exhausted he looks, the more I give into the obsession of making a fortune. "How I have advanced in life!", the dollar keeps rising and I keep sinking in my poverty! Computers keep getting faster, and I begin to resemble a dinosaur!

My resemblance to dinosaurs increases day by day. My mind is not capable of following the latest scientific advance, and I feel more indifferent by the moment. On top of that, I wake up every morning with a dried and swollen throat because of the air pollution. I have to live by the cold-hearted and horrendous laws of the land and the fear of being watched and followed. I suspect everything and everyone.

It was during the past year that I realized that the powerful trend of modern fiction writing in my country – which was my way of life too – has struck a rocky and bumpy stretch. Now I am sitting here, exhausted and enervated, and am not able to fit its pieces together. I feel worn out. I read some recent releases, mainly works of fiction, and realize that the age of innocent, gray, unexciting, and content-free stories has begun. It's as if they have put a veil on every thought. Everything is covered and manacled. Nothing is expressed; and nothing can be expressed. It seems that one is allowed to move one's lips, but, like a fish, one is expected to generate no sound.

Sometimes I walk on our apartment balcony facing the landlord's backyard, but my mother yells at me to go inside. There's a possibility that, from an oblique angle, from some distant point out on the street, I could be observed without my chador; I, who for the sake of preserving a semblance of personal freedom, have chosen a life of seclusion at home.

Then, with sadness I remember a recent wedding celebration in Tehran. The couple had searched for four months for a little place to hold the ceremony without

having to follow Islamic codes of dress and conduct. Secluded houses, where they would not be harassed, are expensive and difficult to come by, but they managed to secure a place. On the eve of the wedding, some individuals knocked on the door at 6 p.m. and did not leave until they were paid. At 8 p.m., the frightened host reported the sighting of a suspicious group of people on the street. The wedding party lost its warmth and tranquility, and the guests began counting seconds until the end of the ceremony so that they could slip away from 'joy and celebration' under the umbrella of 'fear and persecution'. But, to show respect to the bride and the groom, they stayed on patiently. By 11 p.m. when most of the guests had already left, the doorbell was rung again. It was a new group of intruders, and they left after they were properly paid. The celebration ended then.

And the other day a young female doctor was telling me that she had filled out forms to immigrate to Canada once she finished her internship in a hospital in a remote town. She said that she spends her entire day at work and stays in her room afterwards, fearing harassment out on the street.

But I am still sitting on the couch and thinking about miniature cameras and long-distance thought-control processes. I realize that the world today is far more unpleasant and ugly than Orwell's rendition in *1984*. On the one hand, I am bound by laws belonging to centuries past and, on the other, I am surrounded by tools and technology bridging the present with the future. It occurs to me that in the age of satellites and the possibility of invoking thoughts through electromagnetic radiation, one could not rule a society with ancient, web-like, and entrapping laws. The combination of the ancient and the futuristic elements exhausts one's soul profoundly. One cannot behave in public in a way different from the way one acts in private. The frequency of deceit by those who govern is so high that the truth gets further shrouded every moment. And a literature cannot be born under such conditions. The value of literature is delineated by the authentic psychology, sociology, history, and geography of the nation.

How could one proclaim that the present misery of one woman is the outcome of the marriage at the age of twelve to a man twenty years her senior? How could one see this and say nothing? How could one report that the emigration of that physician was caused by her dreaming of some very minor freedoms? How could one know this and say nothing? How could one discuss the 'fact' that there's a saturation point to the application of 'deceit', and that beyond that people will conduct their affairs through assuming 'another' route? Is one allowed to report that during the past year some individuals sought 'spiritual strength' by searching in the depth of historical tradition? And what happens if we do not speak up? For example, what if we do not report that a dangerously large section of the population is using tranquilizers? Or what if we do not argue that when fear and persecution surpass a certain limit, people enter a world of 'fantasy' – and it is always from 'fantasy' that unpredictable events arise? Why shouldn't we report that the rate of suicide amongst women has risen tremendously, and that they often commit self-immolation? Why shouldn't we inform that the killing of husbands has increased

recently? Don't we realize that each of these phenomena is a sign of critical and dangerous times? Shouldn't literature discuss such things? Then why is it that our literature is full of meaningless pseudo-philosophical works of fiction? That is how I and Orwell's book co-habitate and reach the end of the year.

But right now the cat in the courtyard is staring at me with its green eyes, and the pomegranate tree is whispering to me that it soon will be floating in blossoms. The sky is still blue, and I am slowly ridding myself of my year-long mental exhaustion. Hence, for the new year, I propose to the publisher of *1984*, to run a large number of copies of the book and mail a good many of them to certain individuals along with a cover letter saying, "This book was written in 1974 or 1948 and has predicted the Soviet Union's crash in 1984 – which actually took place in 1990. It also concerns itself with conditions of the premature growth of technology and it does not display any awareness that its predictions would actually come true".

At this Persian New Year (1373 A.H.), as an independent observer, I would like to express that after a lengthy struggle in the lower wastelands of sorrow and despair, I find myself healthy, slightly jovial, and prepared to write about fears, anxieties, emotional failures and thoughts hidden in the depth of the mind. As a novelist, I can concentrate on the concept of emigration, and I can search for spiritual values too – provided that I would not be overwhelmed by the fear of persecution, a forced dress code, and that I would not be collapsing under the lashes of the morality and mentality of the dark ages. I announce that at this frightening and prosperous age of the advancement of computers, not much time is left for reform and improvement. This time, if a nation loses in the game of progress, it will have lost forever. I suggest a frank summation of all the values of Iranian culture and an evaluation of the percentage of the sum that we can take with us to the upcoming century. And, once and for all, we should concern ourselves with the fact that, "when we reduce people to cockroaches, don't we ourselves, gradually, become cockroaches too?"

Translated from the Persian
by Steve MacDowell & Afshin Nassiri
1994